

# The President's Page



## The Third Man Theme

*Heat not a furnace for your foe so hot that it do singe yourself.*

—SHAKESPEARE, *Henry V*

IT TAKES A MAN young in practice much time to grasp the meaning of the "third party." Lest he appear stupid on the subject, he keeps waiting for someone to identify the party! After he has attended enough medical meetings and discussions on socioeconomic matters, the identity of this third man gradually becomes apparent. If he remains at home and lives in a quiet *cul de sac* of medical practice, he may never understand it.

Physicians like to think of the practice of medicine as a simple two-unit system—one doctor serving one patient, that is, party No. 1 and party No. 2. There was a time when this was true, and things were simpler then. But that tranquil day has long since passed for the civilized world. In fact a whole array of "parties" are now on the loose.

The original "third party" was the doctor's own society in its position as guardian of ethics, sanctionist against poor practice. The next "third party" of significance was the modern hospital. It became an essential part of the medical pattern, controlled a necessary segment of practice, and modified the pristine doctor's relationship to his patient. Third party No. 3 could be considered the pharmacist with his key position in regard to available medicines and costs, thus modifying treatment. Although disruptive at first, these "doctor modifiers" of professional type have found their place, react to reasonable doctor pressure and are now generally accepted as "part of the team."

A new separate category of "outside" modifiers of medical practice has appeared in the past generation. These are socioeconomic third parties that exert their influence either by tending to control the dollars for medical care, collective bargaining for the patient or by passing restrictive medical laws. They include insurance companies, labor unions, big business and government.

Although each is a new kind of third party, they are by no means equally dangerous to the American system of personal medicine—and this must always be remembered. By all odds the most malignant is

unrestrained political patronage, Big Brother government medicine, and all that that implies. Carefully guided management and labor can be a major bulwark against government take-over, but in order to keep these powerful forces themselves within reason, medicine insists on, among other things, the concept of "free choice" on the part of individual patients.

And then there is the insurance industry that is the current unpopular "third party" of those who are too close to the trees to see the forest. Certainly the prepayment habits of Americans are forcing basic changes in savings patterns, including paying for health care. Of course there is a risk in change itself and naturally the insurance methods must be guided and molded. But to equate this in degree of danger to smothering by government is erroneous. In fact, voluntary prepayment health insurance is doubtlessly the single greatest defense against politicians that we have. And yet a few not only see the devil in the insurance device but go even further and astoundingly, maintain that insurance programs, guided, developed, and completely controlled by doctors themselves—such as C.P.S. and foundations—are dangerous third party schemes too!

Actually, the doctor's own voluntary prepayment health insurance organizations are the logical evolution of the *original* "third party"—that is, the medical profession itself. Either doctors must believe in the actions and responsibilities of their own organizations and grant them, through democratic methods, some of their individual prerogatives for the good of the vast majority, or all is lost.

Not every third party is bad. Its danger depends upon who controls or guides it. If guided by physicians, and susceptible to change with responsibility, it is no more than the mature, modern evolution of a medical society. However, to the degree that such is not the case, doctors must be on guard and retain a position of unified strength.

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